

Ring Around Dulcie

By Jack Ritchie

NOTE: A publication copy of this story could not be found in time to be included in this collection.

"Children," Dulcie Bennett said, "I won't be with you next Monday."

Edith began to sniffle.

"Edith," Dulcie said gently. "Please don't cry."

"I'm not crying, Miss Bennett. I just got an allergy. I'm taking shots for it," she added proudly.

Dulcie gave her some facial tissue. She *did* hope that Miss Swenson would remember *always* to have a box of tissue handy.

And would Miss Swenson understand that Jimmy had to be treated with just a *little* more consideration than the others? He was such a sensitive boy. And would she know that Freddie had to be *told* to behave, and *firmly*?

Dulcie sighed. She would have preferred to leave at the end of the semester. She and Robert had planned things that way. But now he was being transferred to the coast and their marriage had to take place this weekend.

She dreaded this moment. After all, a teacher, even a kindergarten teacher, spends a great deal of time with her class — sometimes almost as much time as the parents themselves. And she was extremely fond of the children and she knew they were fond of her.

Jimmy would probably cry. And Edith eventually — besides the allergy. And Susie, and Alice, and Genevieve, and Rosa Lee. And probably even some of the other boys too. She would have to handle this parting delicately and she knew it would be a poignant, sweet-sad moment that she would remember the rest of her life.

"Children," she began again. "I won't be with you on Monday, but another nice lady will. Her name is Miss Swenson. I'm sure that you'll all like her."

But I hope you don't. Dulcie started guiltily at her own thought and flushed faintly. "I'm sure that she will take good care of you."

But I doubt it. Really now, she thought, I've got to watch that. She pulled herself together. "I want all of you to cooperate with her. Just as though she were I." She were *me*? She *was* I? *Me*? "Just as though I were here."

"You're getting married, huh?" Freddie asked.

Dulcie nodded. How did the children know? Kindergarten grapevine?

"Congratulations," Freddie said.

Blond Cindy Sue shook her head. "You're supposed to congratulate the groom, not the bride. *Silly*."

"Well, she's here and he isn't," Freddie said equably.

Dulcie noticed that Ellie Morrison had a thoughtful look on her face and she acted swiftly. "Ellie, I think it's time you went to the bathroom."

Ellie left the room.

"I'll have to tell that Swenson woman about that, Dulcie thought. And Marvin always scratches his ear when he has to....

"Children," Dulcie said. "I know I'm going to miss you. It's been such a genuine pleasure to be with you."

Freddie looked doubtful. "How come if it's a pleasure you sometimes take aspirins in the afternoon?"

"Well... sometimes it's a long day." Come to think of it, some of them *had* been quite long.

But they were really such *sweet* children. She enjoyed being with them.

When she had met Robert for the first time at her sister's party, he had already known something about her. "You're a teacher?"

"Yes." And then a bit defensively. "Kindergarten."

He had smiled. "Every bit as important as any grade in school. How many children do you have?"

"Twenty-seven at the present time. They're really no trouble at all."

But he had grinned. "I'll bet you're glad when it's Friday."

Now Edith said, "Can we paint?"

"You painted this morning."

"But I want to paint now."

"No. Not right now."

"Why not?"

"Because I *said* so." Where was she? Oh, yes. "I'll always remember you children, no matter how many miles separate...."

"Can we march in a circle?" Freddie asked.

"No."

Ellie came back into the room. She pointed to Marvin. "He's scratching his ear."

"Marvin," Dulcie said.

He left the room.

"I'll always think of you as the nicest children I've ever had."

"How many children have you taught, Miss Bennett?" Jimmy asked.

Dulcie smiled. "Oh... close to four hundred, I imagine."

"Do you remember them *all*?"

Dulcie was about to nod and then the thought struck her. Come to think of it... except for a face here and there.... "I remember than all with the deepest affection," she said firmly.

Ronnie Brannon yawned.

Dulcie frowned at him. "Why didn't you take your nap when you were supposed to?"

"I wasn't sleepy *then*. Should I take a nap now?"

"No. And Elmer, stop tilting your chair.

You'll fall and break your little neck." Did all children named Elmer have to have freckles? She wondered with a touch of irritation.

"Why do we always have to take naps?" Freddie asked.

"Because you need the rest. And if *you* don't, *I* do." Dulcie re-gathered her thoughts. "Children, I'm taking this opportunity to say goodbye to all of you and to wish and hope...."

Geraldine began sniffling.

Dulcie frowned. "I suppose you have an allergy too?"

"No. I'm *crying*."

Dulcie softened. "But, Geraldine, as we grow older we learn that sometimes we have to say goodbye...."

"I'm crying because I can't find my blue dressmaker's chalk."

Dressmaker's chalk?

"I just *never* go *anywhere* without my blue dressmaker's chalk."

The five minute search ended when Geraldine announced brightly that *now* she remembered that today she had left her blue dressmaker's chalk at home.

Dulcie gave her a stiff mayhem smile.

"I like you," Wilbur announced.

"Why?" Dulcie asked warily.

"Because you're the only teacher in the whole school who can whistle."

That wasn't exactly true. Clare Jones who had the third grade could whistle too. But only "The E-ri-ee Canal." Hardly a song to whistle before third graders. Mr. Hardy, the principal, had cautioned her about that.

"Can Miss Swenson whistle?"

"I don't know."

Dulcie glanced at the wall clock. Five to three. She would have taken an aspirin, but she had the suspicion that Freddie would grin.

"Are you going to have children?" Madge Granger asked.

Dulcie gave that some new hard thought.

"It seems inevitable."

"Like us?"

"Of course," she said bravely.

Her eyes went to the clock again. "I think it's time for all of us to get ready to go home now."

The children stormed into the cloakroom and Dulcie followed them.

She was relieved that it wasn't winter. That would have meant twenty-seven snowsuits, twenty-seven pairs of mittens, twenty-seven pairs of boots, twenty-seven scarves to tie. And there was always something missing. Even now.

"Miss Bennett, I can't find my hat."

"It's on the floor. Dust it off before you put it on."

"My zipper's stuck."

Dulcie unstuck the zipper.

An anguished wail. "Tommy's punching me, Miss Bennett."

Punch him back. You're bigger than he is. But she said, "Stop punching Jenny. That isn't nice."

"Miss Bennett, the chocolate in my jacket pocket melted."

Well, change your brand. However, "Just don't put your hand in your pocket and be sure to tell your mother as soon as you get home." *I'll bet she'll be thrilled.*

And then the heavenly, glorious dismissal bell rang. Get out of the way, Dulcie reminded herself, watch out for the stampeding herd.

But the herd didn't stampede. The twenty-seven children looked up at her and evidently something had begun to penetrate.

"You're *really* not going to be here Monday, Miss Bennett?" Edith asked.

"No." Why didn't they just *leave*?

Tears brimmed in Madge's eyes. "Not ever?"

Dulcie sighed. "I might visit you sometime. If I'm ever in this part of the

country again and have the strength."

Dulcie saw more tears. Oh, come now!

Freddie began sniffling and Dulcie knew that he didn't have a cold. And no allergy would dare touch him.

Tears streamed down Edith's face. "I hate Miss Swenson. She's a *witch*."

"But Edith, honey, you've never even seen her. I'm sure she's very nice."

"No, she's *not*. She's a *witch, witch, witch!*"

Tommy wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I'll kick her."

"Now, Tommy, that isn't at *all* nice." But Dulcie felt a heart tug. Tommy was such a *good boy* when he wasn't punching Jenny.

"I'll never go to school again," Elsie sobbed. "I'll get sick every day. Just wait and see."

And then they were *all* crying.

Goodness, Dulcie thought, it must be contagious. She found a handkerchief for herself. "Now, children. You really must go. Your bus is waiting."

But it wasn't quite that simple. She was forced to dispense twenty-seven hugs, twenty-seven kisses, and turn down three proposals of marriage before the last of the children left the cloakroom.

She went to the window and watched them board the bus. A few were still sniffling, but it was a bright, sunny afternoon, and they were healthy children who would soon be laughing again.

Perhaps some of them will remember me for a little while, Dulcie reflected sadly.

She dabbed at her eyes for a moment and then went to her desk to pack up for the last time. She unlocked the drawer of her desk. There would be other children to think of some day. One? Two?Three?

She decided to take the bottle of aspirins with her. ♦